

# DRIVER FATIGUE IN EUROPEAN ROAD TRANSPORT



## Summary of a new study by ETF\*

**D**river fatigue is widely recognised as a major risk factor that reduces road safety and poses a threat, not only to drivers, but to all road users. However, there has been little research on driver fatigue in commercial transport, and no extensive EU-wide study or report on the topic in the last 15 years.

The twofold objective of this study is, firstly, to describe the nature and extent of driver fatigue in the road passenger and freight transport sector in Europe. Secondly, it sets out to examine the specific working conditions of professional drivers and how these conditions lead to endemic fatigue in the sector. Very few studies have analysed fatigue in bus, coach and truck drivers in the context of their specific work environment and working conditions or the general economic conditions of the sector.

The study has reviewed the existing literature on the relation between safety and causes and countermeasures affecting fatigue in bus, coach and truck drivers.

It is based on an analysis of primary data gathered through an online survey of around 2,800 bus, coach and truck drivers

in Europe. as well as in-depth interviews and workshops involving drivers, trade union representatives and scientific experts.

---

***Experiencing fatigue is not a conscious or planned decision; it is rather an autonomic mental and physical process***

## DEFINING DRIVER FATIGUE

Because fatigue is defined in various ways, some drivers do not know its symptoms and may not even be aware that they are fatigued until an accident occurs. However, many definitions share the idea that fatigue is a state caused by prolonged exertion. It is a condition that manifests itself physiologically, cognitively and emotionally. In drivers, it leads to a decrease in mental and physical functioning, which in turn leads to poor steering control, decreased reaction time, poor speed tracking and loss of attention and hazard perception. Experiencing fatigue is not a conscious or planned decision; it is rather an autonomic mental and physical process

Fatigue-related crashes are often characterised by a significant loss of control that results in an unintended vehicle trajectory, and no braking response. Road accidents involving heavy vehicles tend to be more serious than other collisions, with grave consequences for all concerned, because the vehicles' size and mass entail greater and more destructive forces. In Europe in 2016 (according to the latest available data, from the EU CARE database) 4,002 people were killed in road accidents involving trucks, and 594 people in accidents involving buses or coaches.

An exhaustive list of the symptoms of driver fatigue may not be universally agreed, but it is

---

***Road accidents involving heavy vehicles tend to be more serious than other collisions***

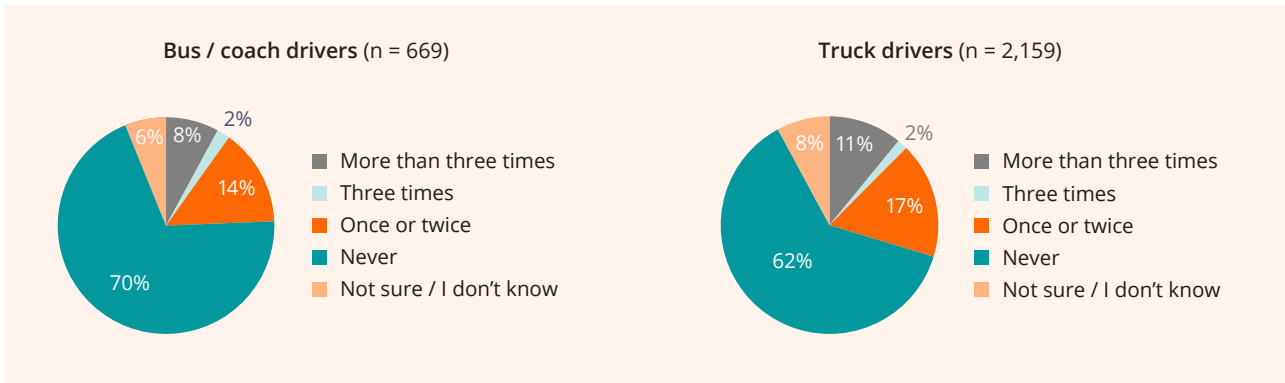
\* *Driver Fatigue in European Road Transport*. By Katrin Vitols and Eckhard Voss, *wmp consult*, for ETF.

Published June 2021. © European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF)

The report is available in PDF format from <https://www.etf-europe.org/resource/driverfatigue/>



### In the past 12 months, how often have you fallen asleep while driving?



widely understood among bus, coach and truck drivers that driver fatigue is a serious problem throughout Europe. Many drivers see fatigue as a characteristic feature of the driving profession.

### 60% OF DRIVERS ARE FATIGUED WHILE DRIVING

The survey's results show that around two-thirds of professional drivers regularly feel tired when driving (66% of surveyed bus and coach drivers; 60% of surveyed truck drivers). Around a quarter to almost a third of drivers admitted to having fallen asleep while driving at least once in the previous twelve months (24% of the bus and coach drivers; 30% of the truck drivers). However, our targeted interviews also show that drivers are generally afraid of reporting such incidents, as they fear it might have repercussions on their employment. The real extent of the problem could potentially be much greater.

Despite the recognition of fatigue as a risk factor for accidents, and despite the existence of legislation at European level on driving times and rest periods, this study shows that driver fatigue is a widespread and structural problem in the road passenger and freight transport sector in Europe.

### POOR WORKING CONDITIONS ARE THE CAUSE

While there is a wide variety of possible reasons for driver fatigue, existing studies focus only on a handful. Factors often cited in studies include lack of sleep, poor quality sleep and specific sleep demands. This study, however, goes a step further, and shows how poor working and employment

conditions are among the underlying reasons accounting for shortage of sleep in the first place.

### Long working hours

A key contributor to fatigue is the total extent of working time. The working hours of bus, coach and truck drivers are particularly long, leaving insufficient time for satisfying the basic needs for recuperation and restorative sleep, let alone for the achievement of a satisfactory work-life balance.

88% of the surveyed truck drivers and 60% of the surveyed bus and coach drivers worked more than the 40 hours per week – which is considered the norm in most other sectors and professions – and a significant proportion of these drivers worked more than 50 hours per week.

***Around a quarter to almost a third of drivers admitted to having fallen asleep while driving at least once in the previous twelve months***

### Low salaries

There is a direct relation between the level of drivers' remuneration and their long working hours. A common proposal by the surveyed drivers was that working time should be reduced in order to reduce driver fatigue. However, drivers also remarked that reduced working time would require an increase in wages, which typically involve extremely low hourly rates.

## Having to work during breaks

Bus, coach and truck drivers often report having to use their breaks for activities that constitute “other work” (as defined in the EU legislation governing the sector): tasks such as finding parking spaces, supervising loading and unloading activities or loading and unloading passenger luggage, helping passengers to board, and in other ways, interacting with dispatchers or clients, and studying the route. As a result, drivers very often simply skip breaks, although they are often instructed by employers to register time spent on these activities as break time.

## Interrupted rest and sleep

The low quality of the rest that drivers get is also a serious problem. Sleep quality is often reduced by interruptions and unfavourable sleeping conditions. The EU’s “ferry/train derogation” allows an employer to count the time a driver spends travelling by ferry or train as a rest period. However, such supposed rest periods, and drivers’ opportunities to sleep, are typically disrupted by the processes of embarking and disembarking and other interruptions. The ferry/train derogation can only be used lawfully when the driver has access to a bunk bed or couchette; however, a grievance highlighted by drivers participating in our research was that they often lack appropriate rest facilities during such journeys.

## Unpredictable working conditions

Many drivers taking part in our survey reported irregular and unrealistic working schedules, rotating shifts with frequent changes in the work-rest schedule, round-the-clock schedules and night work, all of which conflict with the human body’s circadian rhythms and lead to irregular sleep patterns and stress.

## Health and safety

Drivers also reported having to work in harsh and uncomfortable environmental conditions that contribute to fatigue – conditions affected by, for example, heat, cold, noise and mechanical vibration inside the vehicle, as well as external factors such as bad weather, poor visibility, poor roads

and high-density traffic. Heat poses a particular problem, since air conditioning in the vehicles is often inadequate, and fails to regulate the temperature well. In the case of truck drivers, sleep in the cab is commonly disturbed by the lack of air conditioning, unshielded noisy motorways and fear of robberies, owing to a shortage of secure parking areas.

## SOLUTIONS: POINTS FOR EMPLOYERS AND LEGISLATORS

Our survey results show that, when circumstances permit, drivers often end up resorting to “self-administered” measures to counter fatigue, such as stopping and taking a nap.

However, tight delivery schedules and a structural shortage of adequate parking areas across Europe prevent

truck drivers in using such measures on a regular basis. It should also be emphasised that bus and coach drivers are not free to take a break or nap whenever

they need to, as they have passengers on board and strict time schedules to follow. In any case, the prevention of driver fatigue cannot and should not be reduced to a task for the individual driver.

The road transport sector has been characterised by deregulation and intensifying competition, with increasing demand for inexpensive, flexible, fast and on-time transport. This has put excessive pressure on drivers, and degraded their employment and working conditions. Because these conditions are determined by the development of the market, the control over the fundamental causes of driver fatigue lies primarily with employers and legislators.

## Employers

Our study sets out a number of countermeasures that employers can implement to help eliminate driver fatigue. These include Fatigue Risk Management strategies at the company level,

---

***The prevention of driver fatigue cannot and should not be reduced to a task for the individual driver***

investment in better equipment for vehicles (for example, good air-conditioning), and a reduction in physical labour for drivers – since physically demanding work also leads to fatigue.

Particularly important countermeasures identified by this study are a reduction in working time (while compensating any negative effects this might otherwise have on a driver's pay), and improved recording of working time. Our data analysis shows a correlation between poor documentation of working time and driver fatigue. In companies that rigorously document working hours, drivers are less affected by fatigue. But drivers are frequently instructed to register working time as break or rest time. This affects not only the wellbeing of the drivers, but also their pay. And it ultimately affects road safety. Employers therefore need to ensure that all work-related tasks are counted towards working time and are properly recorded – and paid for – as such.

## Legislators

Legislators have the power to remedy aspects of driver fatigue that are consequences of deregulation and strong competition in the sector. EU directives and regulations already impose requirements governing working time, driving hours, breaks and rest periods for bus, coach and truck drivers. However, the existing regulatory

framework does not seem to be solving the problem of driver fatigue, or reducing its impact on road safety, effectively enough. Hence the call by drivers participating in our study to tighten up the rules. As for the “ferry/train derogation”, drivers taking part in our research recommended that it should be scrapped completely.

Another problem with the existing regulatory framework is that it is neither consistently nor effectively enforced. Besides strengthening regulations, a key countermeasure in fighting fatigue is therefore to strengthen enforcement of the existing rules through checks and sanctions. Accountability is generally a problem if there are no checks and sanctions, or if the gains that can be made from infringements are greater than the penalties for non-compliance. The transport sector is no exception in this respect. Instead of pushing for even more deregulation, this is where future action to combat driver fatigue in the EU should start.

---

***The control over the fundamental causes of driver fatigue lies primarily with employers and legislators***

© European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF), June 2021

The ETF survey was analysed by Katrin Vitols and Eckhard Voss, *wmp consult*



## Follow us:

**Social media:**



[https://twitter.com/ETF\\_Europe](https://twitter.com/ETF_Europe)



<https://www.facebook.com/ETFRoadSection>

**Website:**

[https://www.etf-europe.org/our\\_work/road-transport/](https://www.etf-europe.org/our_work/road-transport/)

**Email:**

[road@etf-europe.org](mailto:road@etf-europe.org)



With financial support  
from the European Union